(iii) The Centre should come out with a storage construction plan, which should include furnishing of ten years general hiring guarantee at remunerative rates by the FCI in favour of State, private and other godowns being hired to manage the expected levels of food stocks.

(iv) The Centre should finalise the Paddy and Rice specifications for 2001 -2002 in consultation with the Governments of the producer States.

(v) Paddy procurement operations for Kharif 2001 -2002 should commence in Punjab. Andhra Pradesh and Haryana with effect from 1st of September, 2001.

(c) The issues are being examined.

Strengthening of PDS in rural areas

† 4139. PROF. M.M. AGARWAL: Will the Minister of CONSUMER AFFAIRS. FOOD AND PUBLIC DISTRIBUTION be pleased to state:

(a) whether Government are taking any effective steps for strengthening Public Distribution System in the rural areas of the country;

(b) if so. the details thereof; and

(c) Government's scheme for providing free wheat and rice to the poor people living below the poverty line through the Public Distribution System?

THE MINISTER OF STATE IN THE MINISTRY OF CONSUMER AFFAIRS. FOOD AND PUBLIC DISTRIBUTION (SHRI SHRIRAM CHAUHAN): (a) and (b) Government has undertaken a series of measures to strengthen the Public Distribution System (PDS) in the country including rural areas.

(i) Based on the belief that truly democratic institutions do better safeguard food security concerns of all than the State bureaucracy, the Government has also advised the State Governments to more substantially involve the Gram Panchayats in supervision and monitoring of PDS especially at FPS level as a measure of social audit.

† Original notice of the question was received in Hindi.

(ii) The allocation of foodgrains for the BPL category was doubled from 10 kg. to 20 kg. w.e.f. 1.4.2000 which has been further raised to 25 kg. per family per month.

(iii) To ensure smooth flow of PDS commodities especially in rural, remote, hilly and tribal areas, financial assistance is provided under Centrally Sponsored Schemes 'Construction of Godowns' and 'Purchase of Vans'.

(iv) The States / UTs have been asked to actively involve the Gram Sabhas/ Panchayats in the task of identification ofAntyodaya beneficiaries.

(c) Under TPDS, there is no scheme to give free foodgrains to BPL population. However, the Annapuma Scheme which was launched with effect from April, 2000 aims at providing foodgrains to those senior citizens of 65 years of age or above who, though eligible, have remained uncovered under the National Old Age Pension Scheme (NO APS), 10 kg. of foodgrains per head per month free of cost.

Increase in prices of essential commodities

4140. PROF. MM. AGARWAL: Will the Minister of CONSUMER AFFAIRS, FOOD AND PUBLIC DISTRIBUTION be pleased to state:

(a) whether it is a fact that there has been considerable increase in the prices of essential commodities in the country during the last one year and till date;

(b) if so, what are the specific reasons therefor and the percentage of increase in various essential commodities in the country; and

(c) the details of steps taken or proposed to be taken by Government in this regard?

THE MINISTEROF STATE IN THE MINISTRY OF CONSUMER AFFAIRS, FOOD AND PUBLIC DISTRIBUTION (SHRI V. SREENIVASA PRASAD): (a) and (b) The prices of most of the essential commodities, barring edible oils and vegetables like potato and onion, indicated a steady to declining trend during last one year. Increase in the cost of import of edible oils and lean supply season for vegetables resulted in the increase in prices. Percentage variations in the